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ABSTRACT

This digest provides a history of American bilingual education in Spanish from the late 1950's onward, to help educators serve Mexican American students. From 1958 to 1968 curriculum reforms influenced by the launch of Sputnik combined with an influx of Spanish-speaking immigrants from Cuba to effect development of bilingual programs in south Florida public schools; such programs were copied in other areas. Successful programs in Florida, Texas, New Mexico, and California led to increased federal interest culminating in pasage, in 1968, of the Title VII Bilingual Education Act. The 1974 Supreme Court decision, Lau v. Nichols, held that school programs conducted exclusively in English denied equal access to education to students who spoke other languages. In 1982, amendment of Title VII legislation gave school districts more flexibility in implementing bilingual programs and offered Title VII projects the option of using English exclusively. Criticism of bilingual programs mounted in the 1980s, however, accompanied by a movement seeking to make English the official language of the nation. This digest suggests that schools must continue to confront the problem of non-English-speaking students in some constructive way. Contains 9 references. (DHP)

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ERIC DIGEST

Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools March 1989

A Brief History of Bilingual Education in Spanish

Digest EDO-RC-89-10

THIS DIGEST IS WRITTEN primarily for educators in the United States who may not know very much about bilingual education, but who are concerned with how best to serve Mexican American students, who are the largest language minority (Valdivieso & Davis, 1988). This brief discussion should interest those who are concerned with the overlapping issues of schooling, language, and culture in America: this topic relates to foreign language learning for all students (Lambert, 1978).

Often overlooked, bilingual education has been a feature of both public and private schooling throughout the nation's history (Castellanos, 1983). During the 18th and 19th centuries, such programs pertained to German, French, and the Scandinavian languages. At this century's midpoint, both under the influence of two World Wars and decreased European immigration, such programs waned.

Like the bilingual programs for other immigrants, bilingual programs devoted to Spanish first flourished and then disappeared. This digest takes up its narrative in the late 1950s, tracing the evolution of bilingual education in Spanish—including philosophical orientations as well as historical trends—up to the present.

1958-1968

International events in these years helped renew an interest in language instruction. In 1958, following the Soviet launching of the first artificial earth satellite, curriculum reforms resulted in improved instruction not only in math and science, but in foreign languages as well (Gonzalez, 1979).

At the same time, the revolution in Cuba brought many new Spanish-speaking residents to southern Florida, particularly to the area around Miami. Beginning in 1959, public schools there introduced bilingual programs. By 1963, the practice drew national notice for its effectiveness (Gonzalez, 1979). Soon Spanish began to be taught bilingually again in the Southwest.

1968-1980

These successful experiences—first in Miami and later in Texas, New Mexico, and California—set the stage for more interest in bilingual education at the federal level (Castellanos, 1983). An Act of Congress and a judicial ruling were of marked significance, and they served to increase federal interest and support of bilingual programs in Spanish.

The passage in 1968 of the Title VII Bilingual Education Act as a new provision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 authorized funds for local school districts. These funds were specifically intended for programs for students who spoke languages other than English. Title VII funded 76 bilingual programs in its first year, and served students who spoke 14 different languages (Blanco, 1978).

Then as now, a majority of Title VII funds supported bilingual programs in Spanish. In 1976, for example, 61% of the group of people who called some language other than English their own spoke Spanish (Blanco, 1978). The size of the Hispanic population has almost doubled since that time (Valdivieso & Davis, 1988).

Title VII encouraged the development of bilingual education in general. By 1968, 14 states had enacted statutes that *permitted* bilingual programs, and 13 others passed legislation that *mandated* them (National Clearinghouse, 1986).

The 1974 Supreme Court decision, *Lau v. Nichols*, had an even more sweeping effect. It held that school programs conducted exclusively in English denied equal access to education to students who spoke other languages. The Court determined that districts with such students had a responsibility to help them overcome their language disadvantage (Castellanos, 1983). The Court directed only that all students who do not speak English be served in some meaningful way. It stopped short of making bilingual education an absolute requirement.

Observers (for example, Castellanos, 1983) have compared the significance of this decision to that of *Brown v. Board of Education*. According to these observers, *Lau v. Nichols* gave some recourse from discrimination to students who spoke languages other than English. This analogy holds that, like blacks, Mexican Americans and other Hispanic subgroups suffer from high rates of poverty, unemployment, and slow educational progress resulting from ethnic or racial discrimination.

By its nature, the *Lau* decision expanded the legislated scope of bilingual education in the United States. It broadened the mandate to include any district with students who spoke a language other than English, not just those that received Title VII funds.

The trend of development during these years—reflected in the Title VII legislation and in *Lau*—was to elaborate multiple purposes for bilingual education. As with any aims put forward for schooling, there were disputes. Should bilingual programs help preserve the cultures of which students' languages and experiences are a part? Should they help students to be competent in two languages and cultures? Or should they primarily or exclusively turn students who come to school speaking other languages into monolingual English-speaking adults? These disputes, of course, are deeply rooted in conflicting historical trends and philosophical views.

1980-Present

In the 1980s, federal policy toward bilingual education has been changing, as the historical trends and philosophical views have continued to evolve. In 1981, the then Secretary of Education Terrell Bell tabled proposed guidelines implementing the *Lau* decision. In his view, the proposed guidelines were inflexible, and even harsh. In

RC017155

1982, lawmakers amended the Title VII legislation to give school districts more flexibility in implementing the goals of bilingual programs, and to offer Title VII projects the option of using English exclusively, if they so chose.

In 1985, the new Secretary of Education, William Bennett, expressed an unambiguous view of bilingual education. He asserted that bilingual education programs had failed. In his view, they taught native languages to the exclusion and detriment of English (Bennett, 1985). Secretary Bennett's remarks are perhaps best placed in the context of the movement for educational reform, or "excellence," as it is sometimes called. Many other programs—from math and science instruction to special education—were similarly criticized in this era.

While the most sweeping of proposed federal changes to bilingual education were not implemented (see National Council of La Raza, 1987), the provisions of the Title VII reauthorization of 1988 did authorize important changes in bilingual education. For example, federal initiatives may now direct up to 25% of funds to English-only programs for students with limited proficiency in English.

At the state level there have also been changes. Many states with large numbers of Mexican American students whose command of English is limited have repealed (Colorado, in 1984, and California in 1987) or revised (Texas and Illinois in 1983) their bilingual statutes.

The "English-only movement" has also affected views of bilingual education around the nation. The movement involves several organizations who seek to make English the official language of the nation and of the various states. It has had some success and some failures. By mid-1988, the movement had helped pass official language legislation in 14 states, and new initiatives continue to be mounted. Supporters of "English only" claim that many immigrants refuse to learn English, leaving them isolated from mainstream society and dependent on social services. In their view bilingual education encourages such tendencies among immigrants.

The Future

By conservative estimate, the numbers of students in the United States whose command of English is limited is in the millions. The majority speak Spanish as their native language; of those, the majority are Mexican Americans. Whatever one's view of the bilingual issue, most educators and citizens would agree that schooling ought to confront this fact in some constructive way.

At present, many districts retain well-established programs and employ veteran staff members dating from the bilingual resurgence of the 1960s and 1970s. These programs persist, whatever their perceived quality and effectiveness, as a response to the need to serve Spanish-speaking students. In California, for example, a majority of school districts continue to pursue their bilingual programs, even though the mandate to provide them is gone.

"Foreign" Languages?

Disputes over bilingual education, however, also raise the larger question of foreign language instruction in the United States, which has seldom been vigorously promoted (Commission on Excellence, 1983). Might not bilingual education work in two directions? "Two-way" bilingual programs lately have attracted good notice. The idea is that bilingual education can benefit monolingual students, regardless of language background. In fact, Canadian educators have had some experience with this idea and with two-way programs for almost 20 years (Lambert, 1978).

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